

# **Section X**

Responsibility 8: Fact-finding,  
Research, and Investigative Activities

## **X. Fact-finding, Research, and Investigative Activities**

*“fact-finding, research, and investigative activities on behalf of the Mayor, the Council, and other public officials...” State Education Establishment Act of 2000, Section 6(b)(8).*

### **A. Background**

#### **1. Introduction**

Education research and analysis is an important source of objective, trustworthy information that can be used by educators, parents, policymakers, and other education stakeholders in their efforts to improve the quality of education for students in the District of Columbia. Research on pressing education issues, program evaluations, and pertinent statistical summaries is needed to support policy analysis, informed decision-making, reflective planning, and improved instruction.

The following study of the proposed SEO responsibility for research and analysis reviews the extent to which this function is now being carried out, examines possibilities for how the State Education Office could perform this function in the future, and explores potential benefits that the SEO could have on the quality of education in the District of Columbia by engaging in education research and analysis.

#### **2. Legislation and Legislative Intent**

Other than the State Education Office Establishment Act, there is no specific legislation that establishes this function as a state-level responsibility. Also, there is nothing in the documented legislative history of the State Education Office Establishment Act that interprets the meaning or the purpose of this proposed SEO function.

The language in the Act that is used to describe this proposed SEO responsibility — “fact-finding and investigative activity on behalf of the Mayor, the Council, and other public officials,” — includes terms suggesting that a portion of the research conducted by the State Education Office would be performed in support of an Inspector General (IG) type of function. Based on discussions with the District’s stakeholders, the SEO discounts this interpretation, since there is nothing else in the legislation that suggests that the Council intended to establish an IG function within the SEO. Additionally, there is little research to support that this function is an appropriate one for the State Education Office. Lastly, an Inspector General function with the necessary independence and authority to investigate matters related to public education already exists in the District of Columbia.

Conversely, a Government Accounting Office (GAO) function may be a more appropriate model for the SEO to consider. It seems practical that the SEO, as a state-level agency, would have the responsibility to work with DCPS and/or charter schools, and to initiate research and GAO-type studies on the effectiveness of selected education programs or initiatives. In addition, it seems likely that when differences arise regarding the distribution

of resources or assignment of responsibilities amongst DCPS and the several public charter schools, the State Education Office might be called upon to serve in an appellate role by providing an appeals process, or mediator role by facilitating a forum for conflict resolution. Such responsibilities would require the SEO to develop and maintain the capacity to perform evaluative research and investigative activity.

In the fall of 2000, the SEO held interviews with individuals who have been key stakeholders in the process of establishing the State Education Office. Many interviewees used the opportunity to indicate their strong support for including a research and analysis function in the SEO. Most of those who commented on this function indicated that the proposed SEO role should not be conceived of as conducting “fact-finding and investigative activities on behalf of the Mayor, the Council, and other public officials,” as stated in the law. This language, they suggested, did not reinforce the independence needed by the SEO in order to provide strong, but neutral, leadership for education in the District of Columbia. Most of the individuals interviewed appeared to agree with the respondent who said that the SEO instead should be viewed as an important “neutral source of research and analysis prepared in response to significant questions or issues about education.”

Within this context, the study of the feasibility of this function for the SEO directs particular attention to four areas in which SEO sponsored research and analysis activities seem particularly appropriate. These include the following:

- tracking and, from time to time, evaluating the performance of all public schools in the District of Columbia (DCPS and public charter schools), including the status of education policy, school programs and operations, and student outcomes;
- providing research information for use by schools in their improvement and reform efforts;
- stimulating or enriching public discussion and debate by preparing, commissioning, or creating summaries of existing research on critical education issues; and
- gathering and making widely accessible collections or bibliographies of research from respected sources nationwide.

### **3. History and Current Status**

Within the Educational Accountability Division at D.C. Public Schools, there is a small, competent research office. The DCPS Research and Evaluation Office has the responsibility of producing a number of significant annual reports. In addition, reports are also produced by the Student Accountability Unit, another office within the Educational Accountability Division.

Sample report titles include:

- *District of Columbia Public Schools: Summary of Accountability Measures & Procedures, School Years 1999-2000 & 2000-2001*
- *District of Columbia Public Schools: Preliminary Summary of Four-Year Achievement Trends for DCPS Students on Statewide Assessment*
- *A Five-Year Statistical Glance at D.C. Public Schools, School Years 1995-96 through 1999-2000*
- *District of Columbia Public Schools: Report on "School Performance Outcomes," Spring 2000*
- *Dropout Statistics, School Year 1998-99*

These research reports provide important information needed by decision-makers in DCPS. Since it is clear that these reports are essential to internal operations at DCPS, and should continue to be produced by the offices currently responsible for them, this is not an activity that should be transferred to the State Education Office.

### **Research Conducted by Charter Schools**

Our studies show that neither public charter schools in the District of Columbia nor the two chartering authorities have sufficient resources to actively engage in research and analysis activities. The District of Columbia Public Charter School Board, however, has occasionally conducted or commissioned some research and analysis on issues related to their work.

### **Other Sources of Research**

There are several other organizations and agencies that conduct or sponsor research in the District of Columbia. These include community-based organizations, university research centers, and advocacy organizations. There have been several instances where research performed by such organizations has had a profound influence on education policy decisions, legislation, and the shape of education reform initiatives. A few examples of organizations that conduct research on local education issues include the following:

The Center for Washington Area Studies, George Washington University

Recent Reports:

- *Making a Choice, Making a Difference? An Evaluation of Charter Schools in the District of Columbia*, November 1999.
- *Growing Pains: An Evaluation of Charter Schools in the District of Columbia; 1999-2000*, February 2001.

D.C. Appleseed Center

#### Recent Reports:

- *Reforming the D. C. Board of Education: A Building Block for Better Public Schools*, September 1999.
- *Charter Schools in the District of Columbia: Improving Systems for Accountability, Autonomy, and Competition*, April 2001.

#### Washington Lawyers' Committee on Civil Rights

- Conducts research on issues related to the funding and operation of schools.

#### 21<sup>st</sup> Century Schools Project

- Maintains and disseminates up-to-date information on school facilities in D.C.
- Operates a website that provides access for parents to obtain information about individual school programs and performance.

#### **Expectations for the SEO**

A recent series of interviews and meetings was held with individuals having an interest in education research findings related to public education issues in the District of Columbia. In general, interviewees believed:

- The research and analysis function is an appropriate one for the SEO to undertake.
- It probably will not be possible in the short term for the SEO to develop a major internal research capacity. This is likely to be cost prohibitive.
- Therefore, while SEO staff will be available to conduct research and analysis, as well as author papers or reports on selected topics, it is also appropriate that the Office
  - invite or commission local and national experts to conduct occasional focused research and prepare policy papers, analyses and reports, where needed, to support local reform and school improvement and to stimulate or enrich public discussion and debate of education issues;
  - act as a repository of accurate and trusted information about education policy, operations, and outcomes citywide, and about research and best practices across the nation; and

- make the data it collects widely available to organizations and individuals who are working to improve the quality of education in D.C., and foster sound analysis by these parties.

## **B. Description of Practices in Other States**

The following states were selected as examples of exemplary practices for their systems of reporting and research: Texas, Ohio, California, and Maryland. In conjunction with collecting and reporting on education statewide, these states conduct research that provides comparison, analyses, and assessments of student performance, educational programs, and education policy within their state. Additionally, these states serve as repositories for research on state and national education issues that are conducted outside of the state education agencies. The general purpose of research units is to provide objective, valuable information that can assist with decision-making overall.

### **Texas**

Within the Texas Education Agency, the Office of Research and Evaluation is a division under the Associate Commissioner for Accountability Reporting and Research. This office has the responsibility of “providing objective, trustworthy, and meaningful information that can be used by teachers, parents, policy-makers, and other researchers.” The Texas Education Agency engages in research and analysis directly related to public education in the state, and research conducted and reports generated are a by-product of data captured in the Public Education Information Management System. Nonetheless, the Texas Education Agency collects and reports other research done locally and nationally. Research materials are accessible via their agency website in either complete report or abstract form. Abstract materials can be retrieved in their full report form by submitting a written request to the Texas Education Agency. This service costs \$1.00. In addition, the Texas Education Agency also has links to other educational research sites that may be helpful to the researcher.

### **Ohio**

The Ohio Department of Education website supplies parents, educators, policy-makers, and the general public with a wealth of useful data and information concerning public and non-public education within the state. A variety of reports are available concerning pupil enrollment, student performance, staff, and financial data. The *Interactive Local Report Card* allows one to run customized state, county, district, and school reports on proficiency, test results, school attendance, annual spending per student for area, teacher attendance, median household income, and much more.

### **California**

Under the California Department of Education, the Educational Demographics Office

makes research accessible via the Internet. A variety of research tools provide accessibility to reports and information concerning public education in California. The program *DataQuest* allows one to create customized reports regarding performance, enrollment, graduates, dropouts, course enrollments, staffing, English Learners, and Stanford 9 test data. Report data is available on school, district, county, or state levels. Information on educational research and improvement reports and studies are categorized by subject content and make up a repository of research materials done internally, locally, and nationally. In addition, there are links from the California Department of Education's website to other educational research sites.

## **Maryland**

Within the Maryland State Department of Education's Division of Planning, Results, and Information Management, the Information Services and Research Branch provides analysis and interpretive services based on the multi-year, aggregated, and disaggregated Web-accessed data maintained in the Education Data Warehouse. Publications are based on student and staff data, and are accessible via the Maryland State Department of Education website. Publications include *Maryland Public School Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity and Gender and Number of Schools*, September 30, 2000, *Maryland Special Education Census Data*, December 1, 2000, and *Non-public School Enrollment State of Maryland*, September 30, 2000. This type of research is augmented by studies and research done in collaboration with the Maryland Assessment Research Center for Education Success at the University of Maryland College Park.

## **Summary**

On different levels, these states perform research and analysis services. All conduct research and analysis to inform educational stakeholders, and foster educational improvement.

## **C. Statement of Options**

The options discussed below were considered by the SEO during the course of this study. Brief background information, as well as advantages and disadvantages of each option are presented.

**Option One:** The SEO conducts investigative activities on behalf of the Mayor, the Council, and other public officials.

Discussion: This option assumes that the SEO research and analysis unit would act in a manner similar to that of an Inspector General, investigating reported instances of fraud and abuse.

### Advantages:

- Customers are clearly identified.

- A separate government agency might be able to intercede, in response to negligent behavior, in a neutral, objective manner and possibly avoid and/or neutralize public outcry.

Disadvantages:

- The Inspector General for the D.C. Government already has authority to investigate matters such as these. Placing this function within the SEO would duplicate efforts.
- The Inspector General function is not consistent with other SEO functions and might interfere with the ability of the SEO to perform those functions effectively.

**Option Two:** The SEO conducts and/or commissions research, analysis, and evaluative studies on various educational issues, policies, and programs, serving the needs of a broad range of people interested in improving educational opportunities in the District of Columbia.

Discussion: This option assumes that the SEO would identify and track public and professional discourse on emerging as well as persistent education issues in the District of Columbia, where consensus and a body of sound information are lacking. It also assumes that the SEO would take the initiative to provide reliable research information for the purpose of informing public debate.

It further assumes that the SEO would work cooperatively with DCPS and public charter schools to identify where evaluation is needed and to design and conduct studies of the effectiveness of selected educational programs or initiatives (similar to studies performed by the Government Accounting Office).

This would also require the SEO to prepare or commission summaries of existing research that could provide reliable information on educational issues where action is needed but consensus is lacking. As customers for these topical research summaries, the SEO would seek input from policy-makers, educators, others engaged in school improvement and reform, and parents.

Finally, the SEO would identify education research from respected sources nationwide and develop a publicly accessible repository of research studies and bibliographies of research. It is envisioned that such topical bibliographies would be available electronically from an SEO website.

Advantages:

- This would allow the SEO to play a neutral leadership role in helping stimulate public debate and seeking public consensus on crucial issues affecting education in the District of Columbia.



- It has the potential to raise the quality of public discussion and debate on complicated education issues.
- The SEO would provide an important service to educators, policy-makers, parents, and others working on education issues in the D.C.
- It would provide opportunities for the SEO to form productive working relationships with respected organizations and agencies that already conduct research on these and similar issues.
- The SEO is well-positioned to take on the research function. It has the ability to remain unbiased. It is in a position to view education issues from a broad perspective that spans early childhood through post-secondary education.

Disadvantage:

- Additional funding for staff and resources would be required.

## **D. Recommendation and Rationale**

### **Recommendation**

The SEO recommends adoption of Option Two, under which the SEO would conduct and/or commission research, analysis, and evaluative studies on various educational issues, policies, and programs serving the needs of a broad range of people interested in improving educational opportunities in the D.C.

Under this option, some of the SEO's responsibilities would be as follows:

- to develop a research agenda through consultation with the appropriate persons from D.C. Public Schools, the two Eligible Chartering Authorities, public charter schools, the Council of the District of Columbia, local universities, and local educational research organizations;
- to establish an advisory panel of experts from the research community to advise the SEO on research management design and quality;
- to develop quality standards and quality assurance procedures; and
- to develop a technology plan to make research products available for public access via the Internet.

Upon approval of the recommended option for this function, the SEO would be granted the authority to work in consultation with the District's educational stakeholders to design a plan

for analyzing and reporting statistical data collected from DCPS, chartering authorities, and public charter schools, to engage in research consistent with a research agenda and emerging education issues, and to develop a publicly accessible repository of research materials that feature both local and nation-wide education research.

## **Rationale**

This approach is consistent with the education research function as conducted by other state education agencies. This research component would be separate from, and in addition to, any research conducted by DCPS, public charter schools, and private schools. The SEO's role would be to both supplement and complement education research in the District prepared by other organizations and agencies. In conducting research and analysis, the SEO would develop partnerships with local schools, public education agencies, universities, and education research organizations, such as D.C. Appleseed Center, D.C. Voice, and Twenty-first Century that have a similar purpose, that is, to provide valuable information that could be used in policy development, decision-making, school improvement, and school and district management. It would also serve the purpose of keeping customers and constituents of education in the District of Columbia well-informed. The SEO responsibility for performing research and analyses, as well as conducting evaluative studies on the effectiveness of selected District education programs and initiatives, would assist community efforts to improve local schools by enabling them to possess more information that could help them better identify their successes and remedy their failures.

An important part of improving research and information needs involves making education research and analyses of statistical data available to those who need it. The need to gather research materials and make them available to information users is an obvious one and certainly an appropriate responsibility for the State Education Office. The SEO could address the problem of scattered information by making statistical reports and existing research conveniently accessible, in the form of research syntheses, bibliographies, or original research publications. To this end, by making information available through the SEO website and office, parents, teachers, administrators, policy-makers, and researchers would have access to reliable, meaningful information and research tools that could be used to meet their specific needs.

## **E. Application of Decision Criteria**

This section contains the State Education Office's assessment of the degree to which SEO assumption of responsibility for becoming a neutral source of research and analysis prepared in answer to significant questions about education would satisfy the stated decision criteria.

### **1. Consistency With the Vision and Mission of the SEO**

Acting as a neutral source of research, analysis, and evaluative studies of important education issues is fully consistent with the SEO vision.

## **2. Effect on the Transferring Agency**

This function, as articulated, is currently not being performed by any entity. Research conducted by the SEO would be independent of the research DCPS or charter schools might elect to undertake or be expected to perform. Any research carried out by the State Education Office would be available to, and could be used to assist, DCPS and public charter schools. Joint research efforts with DCPS and public charter schools might also be conducted.

## **3. Effect on the Quality of Educational and Other Services to Children and Adults**

This responsibility should improve the quality of information available to local school and District personnel, policy-makers, the press, and the public. Resulting research information produced by the SEO and other sources would be available for use by those who have been charged with improving the quality of educational services to children and adults.

## **4. Potential for Duplication of Functions**

Assumption of this responsibility by the SEO would not create duplication. Research and analysis undertaken, commissioned, or compiled by the SEO would be coordinated with or complementary to that conducted by DCPS, but would not duplicate nor diminish the continuing need for the research reports currently prepared by DCPS. Research conducted by DCPS is related to the operation, planning, and program development needs of the school system. Research conducted by the SEO would respond to questions more broadly related to education questions affecting all schools serving students who are District residents.

## **5. Effect on Reporting Requirements**

Assumption of this function by the SEO should have little or no effect on reporting requirements of school authorities, except as noted in the discussion of Standardized Requirements for Annual Reporting in Section IX. Data gathered as a result of the procedures discussed in Section IX, along with other data already routinely collected, should be sufficient to support the study of most research questions. However, there may be a need for additional reporting in the case of GAO-type studies sponsored by the SEO.

## **6. Potential for Conflict of Interest**

The SEO should be well-positioned to approach any research task as a neutral agency and not as an advocate of any particular viewpoint or perspective. This should reduce the potential for conflicts of interest.

## **7. Effect on Cost**

This is a new, not a transferred, function; therefore, it would not carry existing resources with it. There would be some cost to the SEO for managing and carrying out the responsibility, and some need for resources to commission others to conduct research. The extent of these costs is examined in the Transition Plan below.

## **F. Transition Plan for the Assumption of the Function**

Because the State Education Office would be assuming a function that is not already the responsibility of any public or charter school office, the transition plan would not call for an explanation of transfer of responsibilities from one office to another.

### **1. Authority and Responsibility of Each Party at Each Stage of the Transition**

It will be the strategy of the State Education Office to form a working group of experts, including appropriate representatives of DCPS, the two chartering authorities, and D.C. organizations that conduct, report on, or use research, including organizations that provide information to parents. Detailed planning for the implementation of this function would have to await formal approval by the Mayor and the Council for the SEO to assume responsibility, since the planning and implementation is to be carried out in collaboration with numerous other individuals and organizations.

During the final two months of FY 2001 and continuing into early FY 2002, the SEO would provide leadership for engaging a working group in the development of more detailed plans for implementation of the function. This would include plans for assuring that the resulting SEO research component maintains strong links to other research and information dissemination efforts in D.C. The process would also recommend important initial topics for which research and analysis is needed, and identify places where work on these topics is underway or planned, allowing the SEO to coordinate its efforts and identify its own research opportunities.

During the same period of time, the SEO would make staffing decisions that would thoughtfully strengthen its capacity to conduct its own research and analysis, as well as to manage research contracts awarded to other individuals and organizations. Over the long term, the SEO expects to make considerable use of commissioned research and analysis products. This is an attractive strategy because it would allow the SEO to seek the most informed and capable researchers, no matter what topic or issue was being addressed. Also, by contracting with local researchers, the SEO would be contributing to the development of local capacity and expertise.

### **2. Dates and Benchmarks for Assumption of Authority, Responsibility, Budget, and Employees**

The SEO would assume authority and responsibility on the date that the D.C. Council ratifies the decision of the Mayor of the District of Columbia, since we believe no legislative or administrative authority is needed for this function beyond the State Education Office Establishment Act of 2000. We anticipate that the date might be as early as August 1, 2001.

Since this function, as interpreted from the law, is not formally assigned to any agency at this time, SEO assumption would not require any transfer of budget authority. The cost of this

activity would be included, along with other core functions, in the SEO's general budget authority.

For the same reason, assumption of the responsibility would not result in the transfer to the SEO of any employees.

### **3. Estimated Cost to the SEO for Assumption and Management of Function and Recommended Source(s) of Revenue**

During the remainder of Fiscal Year 2001 (through September 30, 2001), additional planning activities would be conducted under the management of a technical consultant.

Estimated FY 2001 cost	\$ 12,000 (160 consultant hours)
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During Fiscal Year 2002, one FTE of a mid-level professional staff person, plus 300 hours of consultant time for the preparation of commissioned research would be assigned to this function. The SEO also would hold a competition for at least one research contract in FY 2002.

Estimated FY 2002 cost	\$ 81,000 (1 FTE SEO staff)
	21,000 (400 consultant hours)
	<u>75,000 (contracted research)</u>
Total FY 2002 cost	\$177,000

### **4. Factors With Potential for Disrupting Services to Students and Recommended Steps to Prevent Disruption**

Assumption of this function has no potential for disrupting services to students.